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SENATE HISTORY

**1941-1963**

**November 2, 1954**  
**Senator Elected on a Write-in Ballot**

On the first day of September 1954, South Carolina **Strom Thurmond**1 Democratic Senator Burnet Maybank died unexpectedly. Earlier that year, Maybank had won his party's primary nomination for a third full Senate term. With time running short before the November general election, the Democratic Party's state executive committee, on a divided vote, decided not to hold a special primary. Instead, the committee unanimously designated its own nominee—66-year-old state senator Edgar Brown. Known in state circles as "Mr. Democrat," Brown had long and effectively served the party. No one seriously questioned his right to the seat, but many questioned the process by which he planned to claim it. The executive committee badly miscalculated the depth of public feeling that such decisions should be made in the voting booth.

At that point, 51-year-old former governor Strom Thurmond announced his intention to run as a write-in candidate. Capitalizing on public outrage, he denounced the state party hierarchy for its high-handed decision and promised voters that although he would be running as an independent, he would, if elected, participate in the Senate Democratic Caucus and vote as a Democrat to organize the Senate. (In 1954 Republicans controlled the Senate by a one-vote majority.)

On November 2, 1954, Strom Thurmond won with 63 percent of the vote and thereby became the first person ever elected to the Senate as a write-in candidate in the general election. During his abbreviated 1954 campaign, he had pledged that if elected, he would resign prior to the 1956 primary so that voters rather than the party executive committee could make that crucial choice. True to his word, Senator Thurmond resigned in April 1956. He won that primary and the November general election. He once again took the Senate oath of office on November 7, 1956. He changed his party affiliation to Republican in September 1964.

Serving in the Senate until January 3, 2003, Senator Thurmond established some significant service records. On March 8, 1996, he became the oldest person to serve in the Senate at the age of 93 years and 94 days, breaking the record set by Rhode Island Democrat Theodore F. Green on January 3, 1961. In 2002, he became the first senator to reach the age of 100 while still in office. On May 25, 1997, Senator Thurmond became the longest-serving member in Senate history when he reached 41 years and 10 months, a record he held until it was surpassed by Senator Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) on June 12, 2006.

**Reference Items:**

Cohodas, Nadine. *Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change*. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993.

Bass, Jack and Marilyn W. Thompson. *Strom: The Complicated Personal and Political Life of Strom Thurmond*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2005.

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